

Lost In Iowa

BY JENNIFER WILSON PHOTOS BY ERIC HERMANN

BELOW: Ten miles of lush park trails are popular for day hikes. RIGHT: A restored watershed for better angling, sandy beach and playground provides fun for all. Members of the Bedford Saddle Club get a start on the evening's meeting by building a fire. Earlier fire makers included the Potawatomi, known as the "Fire Nation," who once roamed the area with two other tribes to form a loose confederacy known as "Three Fires." The tribes held a council to join forces for protection against invading tribes. Smoke from three fires signaled the meeting location. The fires kept burning as long as the three were joined. If any of the fires went out it meant the tribes had left the area.



The Quietest Park

And Why you Should Put Lake of Three Fires State Park in Southwest Iowa on Your Map.

Tender shoots rise from the vast croplands of southwest Iowa. Last year's corn stubble has gone gray over a long winter in Taylor County, 100 miles southeast of Council Bluffs. Windmills and weather vanes stand rusting, but working, next to broke-down barns. They're lonesome relics of life as it once was in Iowa.

For weekenders shaking off winter's sleepy mantle and looking for an old-fashioned outdoors good time, Taylor County's Lake of Three Fires State Park is where to go—a 694-acre park named for the council fires of three Native American tribes that once shared this land.

Lake of Three Fires is one of the most underused in the state parks system. It feels like you have it all to yourself. But if improvements continue to work out as well as they have been, then that's about to change.

Workers are shoring up its 10.5 miles of trails.

A lake renovation in 2004 (*see sidebar on page 22*) is just beginning to bear serious bobber-friendly benefits. With nothing more than a rod and a lightly outfitted tackle box, you can easily catch your first fish of the season.

The park has 126 campsites, 38 with electrical hookups, located among a pretty grove of old-growth oak, walnut and ash—some more than a century old. Six *Little House on the Prairie*-style cabins overlook the lake.

Road bikers especially reap the benefits of this forgotten



Lost In Iowa



Nestled along the lake, six park cabins make a fine place for economical family vacations and a spot for easy morning fishing with panfish for breakfast. They have heat/AC and are equipped with a refrigerator, microwave and cooktop stove. Renters must provide bedding, towels and cooking and eating utensils. The cabins are available year-round for reservations.

Reserve online at reserveiaparks.com or 1-877-427-2757.



Lost In Iowa



land as they skim along quiet county blacktops in a place that remembers a life of easy fishing, homemade food and long walks on paths lined with wild berries.

NATURAL PATH

"It might be forgotten, but it's pretty diverse," says Doug Sleep, Lake of Three Fires park manager since 2001. He's navigating the 6.5-mile lake loop trail in his four-wheeler.

Sleep says the Civilian Conservation Corps built this park during a five-year period from 1935. The trail hugs an 85-acre lake where grandparents help grandkids reel in bluegill after bluegill.

Sleep is a former college third baseman who looks more like a sunburned coach these days. It's a one-man park. He's the guy running the DVD projector on the handmade movie screen on Saturday nights in the campground, keeping an eye on things.

Lake of Three Fires is remarkably quiet even after winter subsides, he says. Aside from Labor and Memorial days, when the park turns into a small city, things stay mostly peaceful here, even when kids romp on the playground or toss a round of Frisbee golf.

Sleep mows, too, and he can direct you to the prettiest patches of phlox, Dutchman's breeches, ear-leaved false foxglove and jack-in-the-pulpit. In spring, the redbuds bloom like crazy.

Americorps workers and the DNR trail crew will make big improvements this summer to sop up the mud in the trail bottoms. Leggy cathedrals of walnut shelter passers-by on the upland areas. If they get hungry, they can pluck wild strawberries, gooseberries or raspberries.

Sleep stops the four-wheeler and points a thick finger at a flash of polka dots. "Flicker," he says.

"If you're into birding, we've got all kinds," he says, ticking off yellow-rumped warbler, cedar waxwing, rose-breasted grosbeak, indigo bunting, orioles and bluebirds. Then he grins. "They wake me up every morning."

Sleep points out an area on the northwest side of the park that was farmed until the 1950s. Sleep burned it off to see natives such as butterfly milkweed return.

"Gentian's back," says Sleep, taking off his camouflage cap and running a hand over his wispy tight-cut baseball-guy hair. "Indian grass and big and little bluestem, too."

He shakes his head like he can't believe it.

"I've got old postcards where there weren't even trees on that hill."

He drives on. "Here's delphinium," he says, not even looking before calling out the stately patch of purple at the forest edge.

He's memorized the trail.

OLD-FASHIONED IOWA

"What's homemade here, Dottie?" Sleep asked earlier at lunch in the Junction Café, two miles south of Lake of Three Fires. "What didn't come off a truck?"



LEFT: Disc golf is popular at the park and wide trails make for easy hikes. Park manager Doug Sleep makes the rounds in his Gator.
ABOVE: Yvette Zarod Hermann, Deb Davenport and Donna Eischeid saddle up for a sunset ride as the sky turns dusky. Davenport has ridden here since childhood.

Dottie, in high red bouffant (as it should be in a Naugahyde joint where old farmers drink coffee), looks at him like he's just done a back flip.

"All of it," Dottie chuffs, chucking him a menu.

Well, not every single thing on the Junction Café's menu is made by hand. But much of it is, including the tater tot casserole, raspberry fluff, cake for the "legendary strawberry shortcake," hot beef, biscuits, pies and Sunday's ham balls.

Homemade food is a big deal in Bedford. At The Eatery, situated on Bedford's Jesse-James-style red-brick Main Street, the buttermilk pie is the house special. The word "special" just doesn't do justice to owner Shirley Winemiller's warm, sweet custard atop flaky crust.

Her husband, Jim Winemiller, is director of the Taylor County Conservation Board. Winemiller talked about this old-fashioned piece of fading farm country. The 1900s farming practices once endangered the wildlife. He remembered when there were no deer or turkey. Few pheasants. Sparse waterfowl.

"Now we've got all of that," he said, thanks to the

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) that helped restore habitat. "We have so much wildlife here compared to 50 years ago," says Winemiller. "If you saw a deer when I was in high school, you got your name in the paper for reporting it."

Farming practices nearly ruined the lake, says Sleep. "Back then, we didn't have the technology—the knowledge—of how erosion happens."

It went from 25 feet deep to 12. "We lost close to 15 acres," Sleep says.

They dredged it in 2004. Now it's 20 feet deep with good water clarity. Siltation ponds provide habitat for wetland plants and animals and trap sediment. As Sleep zooms past on the four-wheeler, goslings follow their mama around one of them.

Sleep stops to visit with Harvey Ploeger. The 40-year employee of the Mount Ayr Wildlife Refuge comes to the park to catch crappie, bluegill, catfish and sometimes bass. Today, he's reeling them in on the jetty, parked on a lawn chair in a green blast jacket.

"They've done a lot of restoration work, as far as watershed," says Ploeger. "Everything's real lush right now."

Lost In Iowa

Lake of Three Fires underwent a large watershed and lake restoration in 2004. Here's why and how it's done:

- Sediment from farming practices and erosion settled into the lake. It had gone from 25 feet deep when it was created to 12 feet at its deepest point. The lake lost close to 15 acres.
- Dredging is a method of deepening lakes by scraping or removing solids from the bottom. It is only effective if steps are taken to simultaneously reduce sediments entering the lake as part of a larger project.
- A grinder was lowered into the lake from a floating barge which liquefied the muck at the bottom and pumped it out.
- The park built a 30-acre basin nearby for the sediment, now home to a few siltation ponds and wetlands that provide habitat for plants and animals and filter water entering the lake to keep it cleaner.
- Terraces and barriers were built to reduce gully erosion in areas close to the lake.
- The DNR drained the lake and killed rough fish like carp and gizzard shad, leaving the lake to fish that feed on sight and depend on clarity—generally better catches.
- Next the DNR built habitat structure for the fish, like downed cedar trees or more complicated terraces with gravel on top and big rip-rap on the sides.
- The lake was refilled.





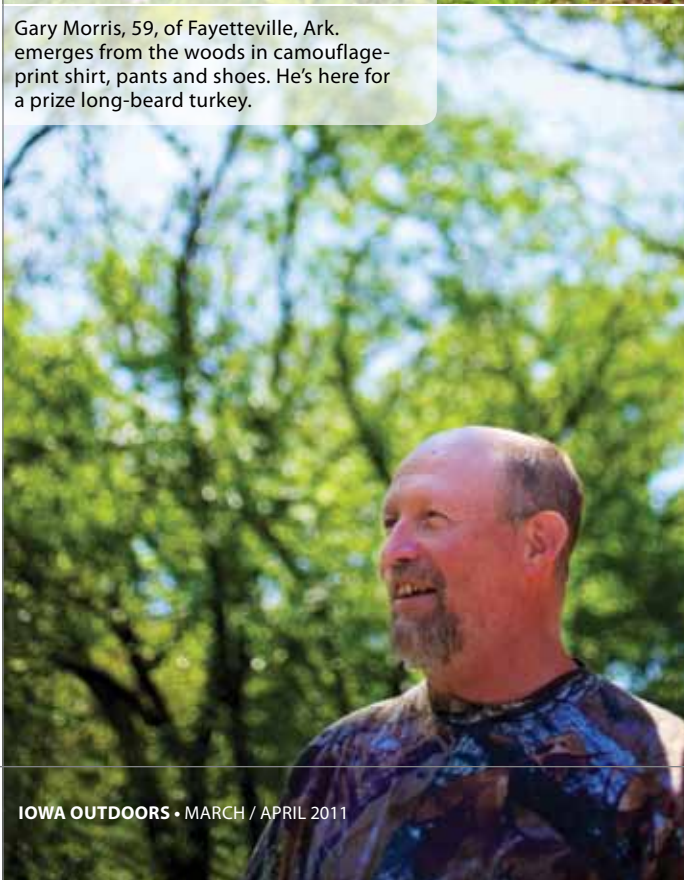
LEFT: Yvette Zarod Hermann surveys the lake in the morning, looking for fishing spots. **ABOVE AND RIGHT:** Dottie serves the “legendary strawberry shortcake” at the Junction Cafe in Bedford. The brick-walled interior at The Eatery, also in Bedford, is known for its warm, sweet custard atop flaky crust. **ABOVE AND BELOW:** The recently renovated lake and improved watershed offer excellent fishing suitable for all ages. The lake has been giving up monster crappies up to 14 inches, along with slab-sized bluegills up to 9 inches.





Wildflowers in bloom make for a sweet hike on a postcard-perfect trail for Eric Hermann and Yvette Zarod Hermann of Des Moines.

Gary Morris, 59, of Fayetteville, Ark. emerges from the woods in camouflage-print shirt, pants and shoes. He's here for a prize long-beard turkey.



A PARK WITH HEART

The diversity and solitude of Taylor County works out well for hunters, says Sleep. "You can go pretty much anywhere in the United States and not see the deer population we have here."

He moves on to visit one of the cabins where a spring hunter is spending the week. Gary Morris, 59, of Fayetteville, Ark. emerges in camouflage-print shirt, pants and shoes. He's here for a prize long-beard.

"I come to Iowa because Iowa turkeys are much larger," he says. "They're in the neighborhood of high 20s or 30 pounds. That's what everyone's after—a large bird. I'm a taxidermist and that's the goal."

Morris built a new home and reserved a place in it for the turkey he intends to bag in Taylor County. "There is a reason I am here. It's to bag my turkey of a lifetime. And not a feather out of place, either. I can do that here."

Equestrians come to Lake of Three Fires State Park for the wide, rolling trail ride. The Bedford Saddle Club formed in 1953 to help turn it into a horse-friendly destination. Today, the east side of the park holds an equestrian campground with eight electric sites and a new flush toilet.

As Sleep's park tour draws to a close, he stops to check on the saddle club members, gathered around a campfire in early evening. They talk horses and good times on a trail where fox and wild turkey are occasional riding companions.

Deb Davenport, a rangy brunette in smarty-pants glasses, saddles up for a sunset ride. Davenport, 47, has ridden here since childhood. She and her good friend Donna Eischeid, 51, head out as the sky turns dusky.

Coyotes yip. The horses flush clusters of whitetail deer. A flooded-out plain of cottonwoods looks like a swamp.

Davenport remembered when the campground was just a mess of weeds. She and Eischeid pulled up two campers anyway, and spent several days with their horses, their girls, no electric and no water but a hydrant.

"We were brave," laughs Davenport.

Even then, says Eischeid, they knew this place was special.

"I just don't know if enough people realize what a nice park this is," says Eischeid.

They'll head back to the campfire soon, where hot dogs are finishing up on the grill. They'll get into the gooseberry pie and monkey bread and potato salad—all homemade, of course. Doug Sleep will call it a night early. The birds will be up before dawn, roaming the park. So will he.

Davenport speaks. "I grew up on this lake. We had our family reunions here. My husband and I got married here on one of the jetties," she says. She and Eischeid navigate the easy, sloping trail, passing woods and water and farmland with rusty barbed wire.

"My mom passed away here while she was camping. My youngest daughter also got married here."

The trail is smooth. They say it's good for a green-broke horse. It's a simple, easy path, and it's one of their favorite places on earth.

"This place is deep in my heart," Davenport says, heading toward the campfire burning near the lake, a council fire waiting for people to see it, and join in.

TRIP NOTES

Where to Eat?

The Junction Café. Gut-busting goodness, at the junction of highways 2 and 148 into Bedford. **712-523-2454 • rockindiamond.com/cafe.htm.**

The Eatery. Come for lunch or dinner in this fun rehabbed building with a tin ceiling, and leave surprised and satisfied. At lunch, try the Rennington (loose meat, bacon and cheese) with a side such as cold three-bean salad. **712-523-2588.**

What to Do?

More parkland. **Sands Timber Recreation Area**, with 235 acres and a 60-acre lake. The rest is timber, ideal for birding. **712-523-2852; mycountyparks.com.**

Taylor County Museum. A formidable collection of clothing, medical supplies, beauty gadgets, military uniforms and much more. The 4-acre complex includes a rare round barn and 110-year-old log cabin. **712-523-2041.**

Antique shopping. Main Street Bedford is known for antique shopping. It's hit or miss, but you can tell from a glance in the wide picture windows if shops have what you're looking for. It's on the National Register of Historic Places—so technically the whole thing is an antique.

Bedford Building Supply. Get a head start on spring with reasonably priced garden supplies, hunting gear and fishing tackle on Main Street. **712-523-2075.** 🐾



Members of the Bedford Saddle Club gather around the fire with park manager Doug Sleep.

